

Results of a Survey of North Dakota College Students on Their Experiences and Choices in the 2016 Election, Part 1

A 2016 survey of undergraduate and graduate students across North Dakota found a considerable reduction in the percentage of respondents who attempted to vote but were unable to participate due to confusion over residency requirements. Whereas a 2014 survey found that 3.2 percent of North Dakota college student respondents attempting to vote in the 2014 midterm elections were unable to do so due to changes in the state's voter identification, only 0.82 percent reported such difficulties for the 2016 general election. While a seemingly minor shift, it represents the inclusion of hundreds of additional college voters. Possible explanations for this change include the renewed use of election-day affidavits stating that someone was an eligible voter and improved efforts at educating transplanted students on voter requirements.

The survey was conducted as part of a larger study underwritten by the Upper Midwest Regional Center on Public Policy at North Dakota State University (NDSU). An invitation was sent to students at the eleven North Dakota System colleges and universities shortly after the 2016 presidential election. Students completed their surveys between November 9 and December 17. Of the 45,359 students invited to participate, 4,810 completed the survey for a total response rate of 10.6 percent. Of those, 4,164 respondents answered questions regarding their ability to vote. The University of North Dakota had the greatest number of respondents on this question at 1,518 followed by North Dakota State University with 1,479.

Students were asked, 'Did you vote in the 2016 election?' with three response options: 'Yes,' 'No,' and 'I attempted to vote but was unable to.' Those who selected the third option were asked to give an open-ended description of what prevented them from voting. These answers were categorized as (1) issues related to residential address; (2) problems with absentee ballots; and (3) miscellaneous issues. Miscellaneous issues included such things as not realizing it was Election Day; working past 7 PM; forgetting to obtain an absentee ballot; and 'no response'.

It should be noted that the results provided here are not based upon a random sample. Thus, the responses may not reflect the experiences of the general public.

Results related to a respondent's attempt to vote are broken down by campus in Table 1. As shown, 85.5 percent of respondents voted successfully in the 2016 general election, 11.4 percent did not vote, and 3.1 percent attempted unsuccessfully to vote. Turnout was greatest amongst North Dakota State University respondents at 86.9 percent and lowest amongst Dakota College respondents at 66.7.

The North Dakota Secretary of State's office reported 61.3 percent of all eligible voters across the state turned out for the November 2016 elections. However, turnout varied considerably by county.

The results related to what prevented students from voting by campus are in Table 2. As can be seen, 96.4 percent of respondents successfully voted, 0.9 percent could not vote due to residency requirements, 0.8 percent were unable to vote due to issues with absentee ballots, and 1.8 percent were unable to vote for miscellaneous reasons. Dakota College had the greatest problem with residency requirements with

5.3 of its respondents prevented from voting for this reason. Conversely, some 0.8 percent of North Dakota State University respondents and 0.4 percent of University of North Dakota respondents could not vote due to matters related to residency requirements.

The results of the 2016 survey indicate that students had considerably less difficulty voting when compared to 2014. A 2014 survey of North Dakota students overseen by the Policy Center found that 3.2 percent could not vote due to residency requirements.ⁱ This seems to have been much less of an issue just two years later.

A possible explanation for the difference between 2014 and 2016 is that the 2014 elections had stricter voter identification requirements. Due to a law passed during the 2013 Legislative Session, potential voters lacking identification were no longer able to attest to their identity by signing an affidavit at their polling place. Consequently, students with identification listing their parent's home as their permanent address could not vote in the precinct where they actually lived. However, a federal court ruling on North Dakota's voter identification laws brought back the affidavit option for the 2016 general election.ⁱⁱ This had a considerable impact: North Dakotan voters filed more than 16,000 affidavits in the 2016 election.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is not to say that student voters did not encounter obstacles as they attempted to vote. Indeed, individual survey responses noted:

"When I went to vote I had to sign an Afidavit [sic] and I was told that that could possible affect my scholarships for school. I decided not to risk it and I didn't vote."

“I was told I could vote in ND as long as the housing office gave me a sheet that proved I’ve lived in ND for a certain amount of time. I was turned away, but later found out they lied to me and I could have voted.”

“I was told my parents income tax would change and my FAFSA would as well since my permanent address was not in my college town.”

Such anecdotal evidence suggests that miscommunication between poll workers and student voters regarding voter eligibility continues to be an issue in North Dakota elections.

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Table 1: Full 2016 Survey Results by Campus

	Voted	Did Not Vote	Tried to vote (unsuccessful)	Total
Bismarck State College	261 (82.9%)	42 (13.3%)	12 (3.8%)	315 (100%)
Dakota College at Bottineau	16 (66.7%)	5 (20.8%)	3 (12.5%)	24 (100%)
Dickinson State University	43 (87.8%)	4 (8.2%)	2 (4.1%)	49 (100%)
Lake Region State College	35 (85.4%)	5 (12.2%)	1 (2.4%)	41 (100%)
Mayville State University	58 (74.4%)	19 (24.4%)	1 (1.3%)	78 (0.0%)
Minot State University	208 (77.9%)	43 (16.1%)	16 (6.0%)	267 (100.0%)
North Dakota State College of Science	91 (76.5%)	23 (19.3%)	5 (4.2%)	119 (100.0%)
North Dakota State University	1,322 (89.4%)	119 (8.0%)	38 (2.6%)	1,479 (100.0%)
University of North Dakota	1,319 (86.9%)	158 (10.4%)	41 (2.7%)	1,518 (100.0%)
Valley City State University	118 (72.4%)	37 (22.7%)	8 (4.9%)	163 (100.0%)
Williston State College	81 (78.6%)	18 (17.5%)	4 (3.9%)	103 (100.0%)
Total	3,552 (85.5%)	473 (11.4%)	131 (3.1%)	4,156 (100.0%)

Table 2: 2016 Voting Attempts by Campus

	Successfully Voted	Unsuccessful due to address problems	Unsuccessful due to absentee voter problems	Unsuccessful due to miscellaneous problems	Total
Bismarck State College	261 (95.6%)	6 (2.2%)	1 (0.4%)	5 (1.8)	273 (100%)
Dakota College at Bottineau	16 (84.2%)	1 (5.3%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (10.5%)	19 (100%)
Dickinson State University	43 (95.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	1 (2.2%)	45 (100%)
Lake Region State College	35 (97.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.8%)	36 (100%)
Mayville State University	58 (98.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.7%)	59 (0.0%)
Minot State University	208 (92.9%)	5 (2.2%)	4 (1.8%)	7 (3.1%)	224 (100.0%)
North Dakota State College of Science	91 (94.8%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.2%)	3 (3.1%)	96 (100.0%)
North Dakota State University	1,322 (97.2%)	11 (0.8%)	8 (0.6%)	19 (1.4%)	1,360 (100.0%)
University of North Dakota	1,319 (97.0%)	6 (0.4%)	14 (1.0%)	21 (1.5%)	1,360 (100.0%)
Valley City State University	118 (93.7%)	3 (2.4%)	1 (0.8%)	4 (3.2%)	126 (100.0%)
Williston State College	81 (95.3%)	2 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.4%)	85 (100.0%)
Total	3,552 (96.4%)	34 (0.9%)	31 (0.8%)	66 (1.8%)	3,683 (100.0%)

ⁱ See: '2014 Voter Study Report,' Upper Midwest Center on Public Policy, 2015, at: https://www.ndsu.edu/centers/publicpolicy/studies_and_reports/

ⁱⁱ See: 'Judge's order requires voter affidavit option in North Dakota,' Hageman, John. Bismarck Tribune, September 20, 2016 at: http://bismarcktribune.com/news/state-and-regional/judge-s-order-requires-voter-affidavit-option-in-north-dakota/article_cfad8b21-d149-541a-b576-1b0317e2982d.html

ⁱⁱⁱ See: 'More than 16,000 voter affidavits filed in North Dakota election,' Hageman, John. Bismarck Tribune, December 14, 2016 at: http://bismarcktribune.com/news/state-and-regional/more-than-voter-affidavits-filed-in-north-dakota-election/article_2ffbc642-642e-553d-997e-3262f94a5451.html